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ABSTRACT

Ideas and guidelines for the organization of effective homework assignments, based on the principle that homework should offer opportunities for learning outside the classroom, are offered. The examples given are for English second language instruction as practiced in public secondary schools in Cyprus, but the principles outlined could be applied to other situations. Suggestions are offered in the following areas: policy regarding assignments; presentation of assignments; evaluation of performance; and treatment of specific language skills. Recommendations include clear and early announcement of teacher expectations and requirements of students; thorough, unambiguous communication of specific assignments; student participation in communication of the assignment in the class; daily evaluation; and complete recordkeeping. Materials, resources, and procedures geared to development of writing, reading, listening, speaking skill and vocabulary and grammar are also specified. (MSE)

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HOMEWORK IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

(Paper presented at the 1991 IATEFL Conference in Nicosia, Cyprus)

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Homework, as a technique of teaching, but primarily as a means for acquiring English outside the classroom, is examined. It is proposed that homework is consistently assigned to students, especially at the secondary school level. A mode of applying this type of academic work as experienced through the public secondary schools in Cyprus, is explained.

The homework proposition refers to the its presentation to students and parents, and its evaluation.

An association of homework reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary and grammar is described so that important aspects are considered when specific learning objectives are pursued.

Homework, as examined in this paper refers to a presentation for a) a rationale for assigning homework to students, b) an approach to teaching and learning, c) techniques of homework organization, and d) an example of implementation as experienced in teaching English to high school students in Cyprus.

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Although most of the ideas presented here have inter-system use, such an effort is neither the focus nor a primary purpose of this analysis. The central idea is organized around the public system of secondary education in Cyprus, taking into

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consideration the various characteristics of its functioning, having also in mind results as those could be observed and evaluated in terms of learning.

It could be generally accepted that teaching implies learning, although learning may not necessarily involve teaching. In this paper, the subject of homework is directed towards learning both as a result of teaching but also as a psychological phenomenon which could take form outside the classroom.

One of the most useful and commonly applied forms of learning outside the classroom is homework.

Homework decisions, on the part of the teacher, are guided by the interplay of several academic, professional, psychological, and sociological factors. School or department policy, traditional practices, and findings on learning research are some of the factors which may influence the degree of each teacher's commitment to learning outside the classroom.

Examining the same subject through a student's perspective, and in order to promote the various language skills, the following, among several other, are some reasons in undertaking to pursue the extension of learning through homework assignments.

1. Extra time devoted to learning English is provided.
2. Students get a chance to review content from classroom teaching.
3. A system of work is set for students.
4. Students develop self discipline.
5. Students identify English with serious undertakings, because they work both at school and at home.
6. An opportunity is made available for students to work at their own individual pace. Weak students have an additional opportunity to work on their own, and with the possibility of extra help.
7. Students are accustomed to consistent work in English, since English language learning is not only a "study-the-night-before-the-test" course.
8. Students have the benefit of getting involved in learning tasks non-existent or with difficulty performed within the time and space limits of a standard classroom setting.

Since the assignment of homework provides advantages in learning English, its organization is important, so that several factors, which may act negatively within such an approach, are eliminated or controlled to a degree, which would allow positive effects to produce desired results.

Good organization would provide a sense of stability, custom, and tradition within the course, so that students associate

such a responsibility with a basic component of a unified English course, which extends beyond the boundaries of a classroom.

Some ideas regarding the organization of homework, referring to policy, exposition to students, evaluation, and language skills, are presented below.

POLICY

Policy refers to the development of a homework policy in order to initiate, develop, and maintain consistency of the program for students to work at home.

It is suggested that, from the very first day of the course, even earlier if possible, the policy is announced. The following, addressed to students, is suggested for consideration and for adoption.

> "You will be assigned homework each time you have an English lesson. Last lessons before holidays and/or a new term starts are no exception without prior authorization from the teacher.
>
> "When you have an English class the following day, you should ask yourself `What's for homework?' If you don't know call a fellow student. You probably did not copy the assignment in your exercise book. The teacher would

not accept the excuse `I didn't know we had any homework', because you know in advance there is going to be homework for each lesson.

"From the very beginning of the school year you are advized to exchange phone numbers with a fellow student.

"If, for a serious reason, you have not studied, you should bring a note signed by your parents (preferably both) or guardian or a doctor and give it to your teacher before class. This would not be accepted as a regular practice, however.

"If you were absent the previous lesson, it is expected that you come prepared for class by calling a fellow student in advance. Absence from school is not identified with no learning and/or no homework!"

EXPOSITION TO STUDENTS

Homework assignments must be clearly stated and communicated to students so that there is no discrepancy of interpretation between students and teachers, and, furthermore, among students themselves and their parents, who could be supportive in helping the teacher for the supervision of a student's work.

A teacher could write the daily assignment on board and ask all students to copy it in their exercise book. A student from the class must be trained to perform this task for the teacher, however, as this saves teaching time, in terms of accountability in education.

The trained student would be correct, to a significant degree, in assigning homework; in case, though, where minor adjustments are necessary, the teacher makes the necessary changes, in which case he/she spends considerably less time than writing the entire assignment by himself/herself.

An example of how homework, due the following lesson may look on board is the following:

Assignment; February 4, 1993

1. S62-65
2. W45-46
3. Memorize irregular verbs: be-bring
4. Memorize two sentences.

Each student should have something similar to the above written in his/her exercise book, each time there is an English lesson. Except at the beginning of a course, when students are not fully aware, all students in class are able to interpret the above assignment as having to work on pages 62, 63, 64, 65 from the student's book; pages 45 and 46 from the workbook; memorize ten verbs from the list of irregular

verbs, from "be" to "bring", i.e. be, beat, become, begin, bend, bite, bleed, blow, break, and bring; and memorize two sentences of at least ten words each of the assignment from

the main textbook, usually, but not exclusively, the student's book.

The teacher must be specific what does he/she mean when certain pages are written on board. It is suggested that when a page from the main textbook is assigned, it is interpreted as students having to work on the following:

a) Read this page.

b) Know the meaning of all words and explain them in English or make sentences to demonstrate the meaning of these words.

c) Work on all the exercises in writing, or otherwise, as instructed by teacher.

d) Try to memorize phrases and sentences.

e) Know grammar/structure as dealt in the passage/page and/or explained in class.

f) Know how to pronounce the words.

It is recommended that the teacher asks individual students to announce the day's assignment in class; of course a teacher keeps a record of each day's assigned homework in order to double check student announcements, or to make his/her own, a practice which sends the message to students, that their

instructor has a definite picture of the work they were asked.

EVALUATION

Evaluation and homework go together. Work without evaluation does not lead to high standards of achievement and/or to accountable standards. Thus, homework assignments should be "checked" or evaluated almost every lesson.

"Checking" and/or evaluation, as proposed here, refer mainly to one or more of the following: a) students are made aware that the teacher is interested in the quality of their work; b) homework is accountable to the student himself, his/her classmates, and the teacher; c) a sense of supervision of work at home, where the main criterion of evaluation is not necessarily accuracy but exhibition of willingness and consistency on the part of the student to work and learn in English; d) students helping each other; e) students working by themselves under the supervision of an advisor; f) students getting recognition and feedback for time invested at home in the process of learning English.

Below, there are suggested techniques, ideas and approaches associated with evaluation in relation to record keeping, grading, working with parents, testing, and timing.

Students need supervision of academic work completed at home. During the class following the one during which work at home

was assigned, the teacher may move around the class and ask all students in class or some of them to present, in their exercise book, the assigned exercises. In case the teacher feels, after a quick look, the assignment is completed, he/she marks the exercise book with a symbol, e.g. a tick (✓), familiar to students. In case the work was not completed a note, using a symbol, is placed in the teacher's gradebook, next to the particular student's name. A student, for example, who did not work on his assignment on February 4, 1993 gets a note which may look like h/4-2. The letter "h" refers to homework not completed and the numbers 4-2 to the day and month respectively, in this case the 4th of February. There is no need to indicate the year, because there is only one year during a single academic time cycle. In the above case the month, February (2), refers to 1993 of the 1992-93 school year.

Recording the performance on homework assignments in the teacher's gradebook refers, among other, to grading students. The quality and the consistency of this type of language learning should be employed as one of the factors and/or criteria in evaluating each student's achievement at the end of each term. This approach to grading is a motive for the good students to maintain high standards in English and for weak students a way out in gaining something, so that difficulties through other criteria of traditional testing, like term tests, quizzes, and oral testing, are viewed through

another perspective - that of individual effort outside the classroom.

Another reason for keeping record on students homework is that such data could be reported to parents. Several parents communicate with teachers regarding their children's progress and achievement. This is done either independently or during prearranged times by the school authorities. It was observed, that parents appreciate specific data regarding performance on assignments outside the classroom, because they take form at a place where such work was supposed to be controlled by them and not the school. Several parents express willingness to be involved in the process for the benefit of the learner.

In addition to parents, students respond positively to homework assignments, if they know that consistency in their effort at home is recorded and taken into consideration during evaluation. When students know that the following lesson a quiz or an oral exam may come out of their daily work would tend to think twice before ignoring the teacher's directions on further academic work, which reinforces what has been dealt with in the established learning environment.

Of course, teachers should bear in mind, and stick to their policy, students are not exempted from homework, because they have not understood an exercise. In this case, they are asked to copy the exercise from the book, at least, and try to

answer, even giving a wrong answer, than giving no answer. This disarms lazy students who do not want to work pretending ignorance, which is in fact the result of negligence to undertake academic duties. In addition, through this approach, students are helped to practice spelling at least.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

When examining the several language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, from a homework perspective, the following ideas are presented for consideration. Of course, it should be emphasized that homework is not normally identified with a particular language skill, as, for instance, writing. Special care must be taken so that assignments dealing with all language skills, independently and in several combinations, are provided for students to study and work at home.

WRITING

Writing is the most frequently assigned homework activity. Students write their exercises in a single, thick English exercise book to last, if possible, for the entire course.

When this exercise book is full students get a new one. It is preferable to use only one thick English exercise book at a specific time as it is easier for the students to a) view notes on important subjects taught earlier, b) have access to materials presented throughout the course, c) keep a

cumulative record of performance through the exercise books, and d) carry it at school when there is an English lesson, without having to think each time which English exercise book goes with that particular day or activity, thus disqualifying forgetfulness, on the part of the student, to respond to specific directions from the teacher. In case the teacher collects student exercise books, those are either viewed during a free period and returned by the end of the day or the following day, in which case, students involved submit the assigned homework one day later.

Writing assignments at home are performed by students themselves, as the exercises are normally an application and/or an extension of materials previously examined in class. However, help or cooperation with others, like fellow students, friends, and parents should not be excluded entirely. As long as this type of collaboration provides practice beyond mere copying of other people's ideas could be accepted as contributing to language learning.

READING

Students, in order to work in reading independently at home, need, among other, to buy three types of dictionaries: a) English-English, b) English-Greek, c) Greek-English. This is succeeded by indicating, at the beginning of the course, they have to acquire copies of these books in addition to the main textbook. Reluctance on the part of the students to buy

them could be eliminated.

Usually students buy these dictionaries, especially when told that these books could be used for other classes, probably business, science, music, and that they could keep them long after the course is over or after their graduation, as English is not a curriculum subject to study and get a diploma only, but an international language for use throughout the lives of world citizens entering and living in the twenty-first century.

LISTENING

Listening is a skill needed most by the average language learner, but probably less pursued in language learning.

Being convinced of the importance of this activity, one first step, related to homework, is acquiring a copy of the cassette of the main textbook, as most of them are accompanied with such aural aids. Students would have the chance to practice listening to passages from their textbook or materials using their cassette player at home. In case they have difficulty of having access to a cassette player, they are advised to borrow one or work with someone who has got one. Some students may be accommodated at using school facilities during possible free times.

Students who have serious difficulty in reading aloud correctly are strongly recommended to buy such a cassette.

SPEAKING

The language skill associated closely to listening is speaking; so these two skills are often learned and practiced together.

For homework, students are advised to memorize important pieces of language, which would help them to: a) know important pieces of English and American culture during and after the course, and b) accustom students in using English without being attached to the textbook (when speaking).

Such homework assignments may include the Lord's Prayer, traditional and contemporary songs, proverbs, poetry and prose extracts, dialogs, speeches, and consistently two lines from their daily assignment, at their own selection or as guided by the instructor.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is the nucleus of all language skills, and vocabulary strength could lead to communication regardless of difficulties in specific areas of language learning.

Special care must be taken that a portion of time spent daily at home is allotted to vocabulary enrichment. Students are

made aware, that there are three aspects of each word, they must be familiar with and take care for their assignment : First, the meaning of each word, possibly in the native tongue but especially in English; second, the spelling; and third, the pronunciation of each word.

GRAMMAR

Whereas emphasis is on the communicative approach, students are asked to work on important grammatical rules, avoiding sophisticated linguistic theories. Attention could be given to topics such as the verb to be, forming the tenses and their use, and irregular verbs.

CONCLUSION

With grammar, and reference to the four language skills, this short list of specific ideas on particular points to be considered for homework assignment ends. The end, however, of techniques and approaches for working with the four language skills is far from complete.

The ideas presented above constitute some guidelines to help in organizing the learning of students at home. Additional matters could be settled with the cooperation between the teacher and the students as they all grow together within the course, the school, the educational system, and society in general. Goodwill, understanding, and an orientation towards

advancement of each individual student could provide guidance for a successful adoption of aspects of the illustrated system.

Finally, English educators could agree that the objectives of each course are implemented, to a considerable degree, by homework assignments. Thus, the recommendation that consistent homework is a required part of the teaching and learning processes, in the field of teaching English, is proposed.

The author Andreas Papandreou is the Chairman of the English Department of Strovolos Lyceum in Cyprus. He holds BA, MA, EdD degrees in English and Education from the University of Alabama. His publications include the book Supplementary English for Lyceum Students and several papers on TESOL with a curriculum development orientation.